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Synthesis, Chronology, and “Late Roman” Cemeteries in Britain

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A stark division is usually drawn between Late Roman and Early Medieval burials in Britain. This has allowed works of synthesis to create opposing data sets of osteological information. A close understanding of the period 300–600 C.E. suggests that some graves currently assigned to the Late Roman period may actually date to the fifth or sixth century C.E. Two recent case studies demonstrate this point, and radiocarbon dating is advocated as a partial solution. Until radiocarbon dating is more widely deployed, many “Late Roman” cemetery data sets may contain chronological ambiguities that diminish their significance in wider works of osteological synthesis.¹

INTRODUCTION

Archaeology is often defined as the detailed study of the physical remains of the past. From its origins in the 18th and 19th centuries to its contemporary position as an academic discipline and commercial “industry,” the subject has absorbed and adopted an eclectic and interdisciplinary range of specialisms and subdisciplines.² Today the excavation report is a multiauthored tome that may include a variety of highly technical reports on subjects as diverse as human osteology, charred seeds, and art history.³ Using these technical reports to inform broader narratives of the past has long been recognized as a significant challenge facing the discipline.⁴

Those who fund and support archaeology are understandably concerned to see this technical detail deployed to answer high-level interpretive questions.⁵ Jargon-laden discussions about the technicalities of a site or specialist analyses are quickly subsumed in the pursuit of a body of data that can answer the “big questions,” which are supposedly easily understood and appreciated by a nonspecialist audience. Such works of synthesis are a worthwhile and vital pursuit. Unfortunately, many of these syntheses may include data inappropriate to their period-specific questions. This theme is explored below through an examination of the way that information derived from excavated “Late Roman” cemeteries in southern Britain has been used.

CEMETERIES AND SYNTHESIS

The objectives of excavators investigating cemeteries have usually reflected the wider priorities of archaeological research.⁶ Antiquarians investigated cemeteries to recover material culture, and any interest in human remains was usually cursory. From the 1970s, detailed osteological reports became commonplace in “New Archaeology,” and today a cemetery excavation lacking

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¹ The McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge, funded the Bradley Hill radiocarbon dates. Andrew Agate prepared the figure.

² Trigger 1989.

³ Bradley 2006a.

⁴ Bradley 2006b; Fulford and Holbrook 2011.

⁵ Fulford and Holbrook 2011; English Heritage 2012.

⁶ Lucy 2000, 2002.

these analyses would be considered seriously deficient.⁷ The details in these reports are used to investigate issues visible in the skeletal remains, such as demography and health,⁸ and broader themes characteristic of postprocessual approaches. These approaches often incorporate artifactual and osteological information to investigate issues such as gender, cosmology, and personhood.⁹ Over the last 25 years, the range and quantity of data available for study have also increased exponentially with the growth of developer-funded archaeology in the United Kingdom. These excavations often investigate tens, if not hundreds, of burials,¹⁰ and one recent study was able to identify more than 10,000 inhumations published since 1980.¹¹

Archaeologists faced with this quantity and quality of data have understandably used it to address research questions such as studies of health, demography, and social status.¹² These intersite and cross-period analyses are informative, and they have significantly advanced our understanding of burial practices, artifact studies, and ancient human health. Nevertheless, it is becoming apparent that these broad syntheses run the risk of ignoring important issues. For the purposes of this Archaeological Note, a series of case studies drawn from excavated Late Roman and Early Medieval cemeteries in southern Britain (fig. 1) are used to highlight the problems caused by an inherent, yet rarely acknowledged, chronological problem.

CEMETERIES AND THE END OF ROMAN BRITAIN

The end of the western Roman empire during the fifth century is widely accepted as one of the most significant transformations that occurred in European history.¹³ The failure of Roman power in Britain heralded a series of dramatic changes that played out during the course of the fifth and sixth centuries.¹⁴ The most important of these changes saw the adoption of a “Germanic” identity across lowland Britain. Archaeologically, the distinctions between the Late Roman fourth century and the “Anglo-Saxon” fifth and sixth centuries appear quite stark.¹⁵ Indeed, it is often

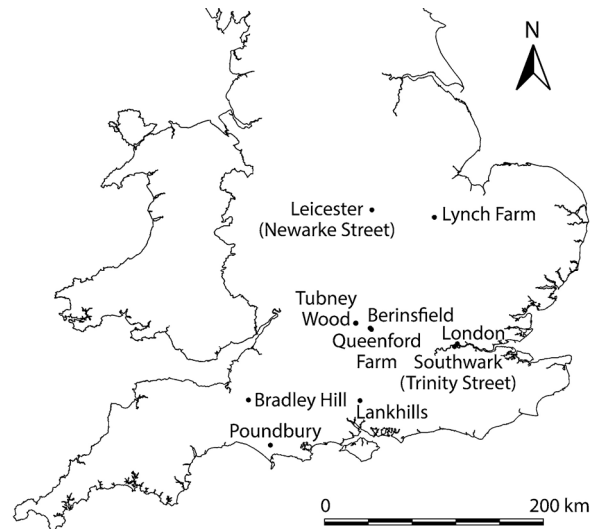


FIG. 1. Map of sites mentioned in the text (drawing by A. Agate).

argued that Britain fell victim to one of the western empire’s most catastrophic “ends.”¹⁶

In the study of cemeteries, the distinction between Late Roman and Early Anglo-Saxon appears particularly clear-cut. Late Roman cemeteries are often characterized as being typically formed of regular rows of usually east–west orientated burials accompanied by relatively few grave goods.¹⁷ In contrast, Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are generally characterized as either cremation or inhumation cemeteries that are accompanied by considerable quantities of pyre goods or grave goods.¹⁸ These broad distinctions are stereotypes, but the illusion of a clear-cut distinction between Late Roman and Early Medieval cemeteries is commonplace.

This division is supported by the long-established periodization of archaeological time. Contemporary scholarship may revel in diverse theoretical standpoints, but the foundations of archaeological chronology remain culture-historical models.¹⁹ “Certain types of remains . . . constantly recurring together” still define the periods used to divide the archaeological past.²⁰ Thus, east–west unaccompanied inhumations become reified as an indicator of Late Roman times, and cremation urns and “warrior graves” indicate the Early Anglo-Saxon period. This issue is exacerbated

⁷English Heritage 2004.

⁸Roberts and Cox 2003.

⁹Fowler 2004; Köpke and Batten 2005; Graham 2009; Eckardt 2010.

¹⁰Chambers 1987; Cooper 1996; Barber and Bowsher 2000; Bradley 2006b; Fulford and Holbrook 2011; Klinge 2012.

¹¹Gerrard 2013, tables A1–A3.

¹²Roberts and Cox 2003; Köpke and Batten 2005; Pitts and Griffin 2012.

¹³Heather 2005; Ward-Perkins 2005; Halsall 2007.

¹⁴Gerrard 2013.

¹⁵Esmonde Cleary 1993, 2001.

¹⁶Ward-Perkins 2005.

¹⁷Philpott 1991.

¹⁸Lucy 2000.

¹⁹Kossinna 1928; Childe 1929; Trigger 1989, 148–205.

²⁰Childe 1929, v–vi.

by the well-known scarcity of non-Germanic material culture in the fifth and sixth centuries.²¹ It is further compounded by a plateau on the radiocarbon calibration curve that limits the utility of the most important absolute dating method.²² Inhumation cemeteries of east–west aligned burials are therefore often assigned to the Late Roman period on the basis of their conforming to a supposedly "Late Roman" burial rite.²³

The identification of these two differing types of generalized burial rites as chronologically distinct would be acceptable if it were not for the situation in the west of Britain. For much of the fifth and sixth centuries, much of western Britain lay beyond the writ of "Germanic" cultural influence,²⁴ and it is clear that Early Medieval burial traditions reflect a development of the Late Roman burial rite.²⁵ Cemeteries of east–west aligned inhumations with very few grave goods have been excavated at several sites,²⁶ where they have been assigned to the Early Middle Ages either on stratigraphic grounds or by radiocarbon dating. At some sites, it is clear that burial began in the Late Roman period and continued into the post-Roman period.²⁷

It is possible that this continuity of funerary practice reflects religious practice. Traditionally, east–west unaccompanied burials in the Late Roman and Early Medieval periods have been seen as Christian. This correlation has, however, been subjected to sustained criticism.²⁸ The structural and artifactual evidence for Christianity also remains rare and open to interpretation, and this is in striking contrast to the abundant evidence for fourth-century paganism.²⁹ Whatever the true significance of the east–west rite, it is clear that its favor in the west means that it could have also been perpetuated in the east during the fifth and sixth centuries. Given this, it seems fair to question the extent to which "Late Roman" cemeteries can be assigned solely to the years preceding 400 C.E.

For example, Durnovaria's (Dorchester, Dorset) large extramural cemetery at Poundbury was excavated between 1966 and 1987, and more than 1,400 burials were investigated.³⁰ The majority of burials lacked grave goods and were aligned east–west, but there were also

discrete groups of north–south burials. As a large and well-published cemetery, Poundbury has played an important role in syntheses of Late Roman burials.³¹ Yet there are sound reasons for arguing that not all the graves were dug in the late third or the fourth century.

The excavations at Poundbury also uncovered evidence for the fifth- and sixth-century reuse of the site as a settlement.³² Unfortunately, no burials were radiocarbon dated,³³ but more than 50 graves are suggested on stratigraphic grounds to be contemporary with the post-Roman settlement phase,³⁴ and other inhumations could be of a similar date.

In some respects, London's eastern Roman cemetery is analogous to the one at Poundbury.³⁵ More than 500 mainly east–west aligned inhumations are known. Their chronology was established on stratigraphic and artifactual grounds, but a relative dearth of grave goods made this problematic. The excavators identified a handful of very late graves, including individuals buried with "Germanic *tutulus* brooches," a chip-carved Late Roman belt plate, and a coin of 388–402 C.E., and conceded that "the end date of the burial sequence cannot be determined very accurately."³⁶

The cemetery at Newarke Street, Leicester, conforms to the same type of extramural urban cemetery as the two sites discussed above.³⁷ None of the 40 graves contained "grave goods," but three inhumations did contain coins dating to 364–378 C.E., 347–348 C.E., and 268–270 C.E. The remaining burials were dated stratigraphically and by association with largely residual ceramics, which suggested that burial may have been confined to the late fourth century.³⁸ Unfortunately, the published evidence from Newarke Street does not present an a priori case for solely fourth-century use. The material culture (coins and residual pottery) merely provides a terminus post quem. In the absence of further evidence, the graves could be dated to the late fourth century or to the fifth or sixth century.

It could be argued that because town life ended in Britain during the early fifth century, burial in extramural cemeteries ceased at the same time.³⁹ This line of reasoning has much to commend it, but it is clear that towns continued to be significant foci during

²¹ Gerrard 2013, 156–207.

²² Hines and Bayliss 2013, 35.

²³ Rahtz 1977.

²⁴ Gerrard 2013.

²⁵ Petts 2004.

²⁶ Campbell and Macdonald 1993; Watts and Leach 1996; Hearne and Birbeck 1999; Rahtz et al. 2000; Cullen et al. 2006.

²⁷ Carver et al. 2009.

²⁸ Millett 1995; Sparey-Green 2003.

²⁹ Frend 2003; Crerar 2012.

³⁰ Farwell and Molleson 1993.

³¹ Roberts and Cox 2003; Pitts and Griffin 2012.

³² Sparey-Green 1987.

³³ Farwell and Molleson 1993, 219.

³⁴ Sparey-Green 2004, 106–7, fig. 11.2.

³⁵ Barber and Bowsher 2000.

³⁶ Barber and Bowsher 2000, 56.

³⁷ Cooper 1996.

³⁸ Cooper 1996, 24–5.

³⁹ Burnham and Wachter 1990, 408–21.

the fifth and sixth centuries, with some early “Anglo-Saxon” cemeteries seemingly juxtaposed with Roman cities.⁴⁰ People may, therefore, have continued to bury their dead in an extramural cemetery even if the town had been abandoned.

Many other sites could be added to this discussion, but they would serve only to replicate the general point: many “Late Roman” urban cemeteries may contain a substantial early post-Roman element. Urban burial grounds are, however, only one component of funerary traditions in the period 250–600 C.E., and it is clearly necessary to consider the treatment of the dead in the countryside.

The most obvious “Late Roman” rural cemetery with which to begin this discussion is a group of inhumations excavated adjacent to a fourth-century building at a place called Bradley Hill (Somerset).⁴¹ These burials were well published in a major journal in 1981,⁴² when few other rural cemeteries had been investigated and fewer still written up. Bradley Hill was thus promoted to the status of a type-site, and its cemetery is used to exemplify a Late Roman rural population in textbooks and more specialist works.⁴³ This is particularly problematic because there are very good grounds for assigning the cemetery to the fifth and sixth centuries.

Many archaeologists have drawn attention to the affinities that these inhumations share with Early Medieval cemeteries.⁴⁴ In particular, the lack of grave goods, the east–west orientation, and the presence of slab-lined graves can all be paralleled at post-Roman cemetery sites, and one of the few grave goods is a fifth-century glass bead. More conclusive are the recent statistical analyses of “Late Roman” burials published in this journal, which found Bradley Hill to be anomalous (although the chronological implications were not discussed),⁴⁵ and two radiocarbon dates from Burials F145 (accompanied by a coin of 388–398 C.E.) and F142, which have returned dates of 356–542 C.E. (2 σ) and 423–574 C.E. (2 σ), respectively.⁴⁶

A recently excavated rural site at Tubney Wood (Oxfordshire) provides another illuminating study.

The excavators investigated elements of a multiperiod landscape,⁴⁷ and the Roman period was represented by a series of ditched enclosures within which were two discrete groups of eight and six graves. The group of eight burials included a single individual who had been buried with a fourth-century comb and a coin of 364–378 C.E.⁴⁸ The smaller group of six burials included three that had been located centrally within individual square enclosures, which are paralleled in a number of Late Roman and early post-Roman contexts. A program of radiocarbon determinations dated the individual buried with the bone comb to 255–390 C.E. (2 σ)⁴⁹ and the two individuals in the smaller cemetery to 425–545 C.E. (2 σ) and 420–540 C.E. (2 σ).⁵⁰ The excavators concluded that these small cemeteries represented a Late Roman burial ground and a post-Roman successor.

It is easy to speculate about a situation that might have led to the burials at Tubney Wood not being radiocarbon dated. The excavators may not have drawn the parallels between the small square enclosures and similar features elsewhere in Early Medieval cemeteries in the west of Britain. Equally, the post-excavation budget may not have been sufficient to fund the radiocarbon program. The price of a radiocarbon date varies depending on which laboratory is being used but currently stands at about £305 (\$479).⁵¹ Given that the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists’ recommended salary for a site assistant is £382 (\$599) per week,⁵² it is easy to see the sort of decisions commercial units may have to make. One date is the equivalent of a week’s salary for an on-site staff member. Without the radiocarbon dates, the Tubney Wood burials may all have been assigned to the Late Roman period.

These sites indicate that many undated “Late Roman” cemeteries may contain a fifth- or sixth-century element or date to the fifth and sixth centuries, as the burials at Bradley Hill, Tubney Wood, and other sites have been shown to do.⁵³ Sites such as Lynch Farm (Northamptonshire), where “Late Roman” east–west burials were excavated, are ripe for reevaluation.⁵⁴ Radiocarbon dating could place this cemetery in the fifth and sixth centuries, and the same might be true

⁴⁰ Williams 2002.

⁴¹ Leech 1981.

⁴² Leech 1981.

⁴³ E.g., Esmonde Cleary 1989, 158–59; Ward-Perkins 2005, 112; Pitts and Griffin 2012, 266–67.

⁴⁴ Esmonde Cleary 1989, 159; Dark 2000, 119; Gerrard 2005.

⁴⁵ Pitts and Griffin 2012, 266–67.

⁴⁶ Gerrard 2011. Burial F145: 1615±35 BP (SUERC 32584). Burial F142: 1550±30 BP (SUERC 32585). The radiocarbon determinations were recalibrated for this article using OxCal 4.2 (Bronk Ramsey 2009) and IntCal13 (Reimer et al. 2013).

⁴⁷ Simmonds et al. 2011.

⁴⁸ Simmonds et al. 2011, 131–39.

⁴⁹ Simmonds et al. 2011, 134. 1716±20 BP (NZA 34888).

⁵⁰ Simmonds et al. 2011, 134. 1588±20 BP (NZA 34887), 1565±20 BP (NZA 34885).

⁵¹ Queen’s University Belfast (2014) quotes £305 + value-added tax (20%). Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (2013) quotes £315 + value-added tax (20%). Currency conversions \$1=£0.64 correct on 30 June 2015.

⁵² Chartered Institute for Archaeologists 2013.

⁵³ Cullen et al. 2006.

⁵⁴ Jones 1975.

of many other sites. This conclusion clearly has important implications for how we understand and interpret supposedly Late Roman funerary evidence.

QUEENFORD FARM AND LANKHILLS

Two recent projects that have applied radiocarbon dating to human remains from cemeteries at Queenford Farm (Oxfordshire)⁵⁵ and Lankhills (Hampshire)⁵⁶ are also relevant to this discussion. The cemetery at Queenford Farm is a superficially typical inhumation cemetery lying just beyond the walls of the Roman town of Dorchester-on-Thames (Oxfordshire). Almost 300 graves were excavated in the 1970s and 1980s, and of these burials five were radiocarbon dated.⁵⁷ Together these dates were considered to give a mean range for the cemetery of 430–630 C.E. Unsurprisingly, this date elevated Queenford Farm to the status of a Late and sub-Roman cemetery. Its importance was further reinforced by its close proximity to an Early Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Berinsfield.⁵⁸ This in turn suggested two contemporaneous but culturally distinct communities burying their dead in the hinterland of Dorchester-on-Thames in the fifth and sixth centuries.⁵⁹

Recent work has revisited the dating of both Queenford Farm and Berinsfield.⁶⁰ This has shown that burial probably ceased at Queenford Farm in the early fifth century and was succeeded by late fifth- and sixth-century burials at Berinsfield. In many respects, Queenford Farm provides a cautionary tale that runs counter to the argument advanced above. Not all "Late Roman" cemeteries will have a fifth-century phase. This conclusion, however, reinforces the main point that we must have a firm basis for dating many of these sites before they are used to support broad interpretations.

The famous cemetery at Lankhills on the outskirts of Winchester (Hampshire) provides another cautionary tale. Excavations in the 1970s and 2000–2005⁶¹ investigated large numbers of inhumations, some of which were accompanied by an unusually high number of grave goods. As a result, the site features prominently in most works discussing funerary rites, health, and disease in Late Roman Britain. The recent excavations investigated 444 inhumations and radiocarbon dated 10 burials. These graves were considered, either on

stratigraphic or on artifactual grounds, to be candidates for the latest burials in the cemetery. Indeed, Graves 1175 and 1440 were associated with coins that cannot have been struck any earlier than 388 C.E. The radiocarbon dates returned for these burials were 237–400 C.E. (2 σ) and 240–401 C.E. (2 σ).⁶² That these determinations appear too early attracted some comment in the published report.⁶³ A diet rich in marine (and therefore "old") carbon was suggested as one plausible explanation,⁶⁴ even though it was observed that the δ^{13} values for these graves were unlikely to indicate a diet sufficiently rich in marine foods to alter the date.⁶⁵

This puzzling phenomenon is seemingly replicated in an unpublished burial from Trinity Street in south London. It contained a coin of 388–402 C.E. and cut through a layer also containing a coin of this date. A rib bone (TIY07, SK203)⁶⁶ was submitted for radiocarbon dating and returned a date of 130–340 C.E. (2 σ),⁶⁷ which was at odds with the associated artifacts.

When this issue was raised with the radiocarbon laboratory, it was suggested that a marine reservoir effect might be at work, and so taking this hypothesis into account, the date was recalibrated to 235–410 C.E. (2 σ),⁶⁸ this sat somewhat more comfortably with the artifactual evidence. However, the consumption of marine foods was limited in Roman Britain,⁶⁹ and the recent publication of a series of dietary isotope values for another cemetery in the London Borough of Southwark casts further doubt on the marine effect as the cause of this chronological discrepancy.⁷⁰

Both Trinity Street and Lankhills might indicate that there is something chronologically awry in the late fourth century. Here it may be noted that a major project examining the chronology of sixth- and seventh-century Anglo-Saxon burials has made many chronological advances.⁷¹ In particular, the use of Irish bog oaks to refine the radiocarbon calibration curve suggests that greater chronological precision might be possible for the fifth century, and a similar project with its focus extended to encompass the fourth and fifth centuries might pay dividends.⁷²

⁶² Booth et al. 2010, table 6.15. Grave 1175: 1731 \pm 35 BP (NZA 29975). Grave 1440: 1725 \pm 25 BP (NZA 29977).

⁶³ Booth et al. 2010, 455.

⁶⁴ Hines and Bayliss 2013, 56–7.

⁶⁵ Booth et al. 2010, 456.

⁶⁶ Hedges et al. 2007.

⁶⁷ Gerrard (forthcoming). 1780 \pm 30 BP (SUERC 34205).

⁶⁸ G. Cook, pers. comm. 2011.

⁶⁹ Locker 2007.

⁷⁰ Millard et al. 2013, 67.

⁷¹ Hines and Bayliss 2013.

⁷² Hines and Bayliss 2013, 44–60, figs 2.5, 2.16; Reimer et al. 2013, table 1.

⁵⁵ Hills and O'Connell 2009.

⁵⁶ Booth et al. 2010.

⁵⁷ Chambers 1987, 58.

⁵⁸ Boyle et al. 1995.

⁵⁹ Booth et al. 2007, 226; Härke 2007, 16.

⁶⁰ Hills and O'Connell 2009.

⁶¹ Booth et al. 2010 (and references therein).

CONCLUSIONS

This article has argued that the chronology of Late Roman cemeteries in Britain remains unclear. East-west orientated unaccompanied burials are routinely assigned to the Roman period and published as “Late Roman” inhumations. This discussion has attempted to show that this approach is no longer tenable. Those of us excavating and publishing these sites must at least consider the possibility that burial continued into the fifth century. Radiocarbon dating would appear to present one solution, although Queenford Farm, Lankhills, and Trinity Street might suggest that this approach is not without its challenges.

Failure to address this issue means that every work of synthesis that has used the cemeteries at Bradley Hill, Poundbury, Lynch Farm, London, or Leicester—or many other sites—may be incorporating post-Roman data into what is argued to be a “Roman” data set. The specialists writing those syntheses may say that these flaws in the data are an unavoidable consequence of its collection and archaeological endeavor. The problem with this approach is that it is a collective abdication of responsibility. We can and should strive to produce better-quality data to better understand the past. We can begin by putting our chronological house in order.

Recent work on the end of Roman Britain has argued that the fifth century was a time of significant cultural transformation distinct from the fourth and the sixth centuries.⁷³ If our analyses of the human remains from this period unknowingly subsume them within larger samples from the third and fourth—or even the sixth and seventh—centuries, the opportunity to study those people and the crucial period of change that was the fifth century is lost.

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⁷³ Gerrard 2013.

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